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General debate on national experience in population matters: adolescents and youth

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.9/2012/2.

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Statement

The Baha'i International Community welcomes the opportunity to offer its contribution to the deliberations of the Commission on Population and Development at its forty-fifth session, on the theme of adolescents and youth. We are pleased that the Commission has chosen to focus on this pivotal period of human development, comprising no fewer than 1 billion people between the ages of 10 and 19. This is a critical period of personal change during which young people begin to consciously explore and apply their knowledge, values and beliefs about individual and collective life. During this time, they take on new responsibilities — providing care at home, contributing to the family income, and becoming protagonists of change in their communities and nations. By the end of this period, many have taken on the full responsibilities of adults.

The projected growth of the world's population presents not only challenges but also manifold opportunities for the governments and nations of the world. According to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in 56 countries, half of the population is below the age of 20, and the U.S. Global Health Policy web page entitled "Population Under Age 15 (percent)" indicates that, in 47 countries, 40-50 per cent of the population is between the ages of 0 and 14. Present-day statistics paint a bleak picture of this group: half live in poverty and a quarter survive on less than the equivalent of one dollar a day. According to the United Nations Children's Fund and the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in 2009, 67 million primary school-age children and 72 million children of lower secondary school age were not in formal education, the majority of them girls. While the challenges are daunting, young people are not victims in need of others to solve their problems. Rather, this age group represents a tremendous source of intellectual and social potential waiting to be developed and channelled towards socially constructive ends.

The future of today's society will depend to a great extent on the manner in which educational programmes and methods are designed to release the latent potential of youth and prepare them for the world they will inherit. The connection between education and individual and collective well-being is well established and affirmed in paragraphs 11.2 and 11.3 f the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and in the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond. Our contribution to this session of the Commission focuses on a particular dimension of education, namely "education in the service of community", which, in our experience, is central to the transformation of individual and community life. It is well known that the forces that influence the intellectual and emotional development of a child are not confined to the classroom. The forces acting on youth through the media, technology, family, peers, the wider community and other social institutions convey messages that may be reinforcing in some respects and contradictory in others, which contributes to confusion for many youth — about identity, moral purpose and social reality. As such, formal education needs to go beyond the exclusive aim of helping young people to secure gainful employment. Educational processes should help youth to recognize and express their potentialities while developing in them the capacity to contribute to the spiritual and material prosperity of their communities. Indeed, one cannot fully develop one's talents and capabilities in isolation from others.

The concept of a two-fold moral purpose — to develop one's inherent potential and contribute to the transformation of society — provides an important axis of the educational process. As one examines the influences shaping the minds of youth and adolescents, it becomes readily apparent that many forces breed passivity and a desire to be entertained. Such forces contribute to the formation of entire generations willing to be led by those who skilfully appeal to superficial emotions. Many educational programmes perceive young people as mere receptacles of information. To challenge these trends, the worldwide Baha'i community has endeavoured to develop a culture which promotes an independent way of thinking, studying and acting, and in which the students see themselves as united by a desire to work towards the common good, support one another and advance together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses.

Although conditions vary greatly from country to country and from community to community — whether rural or urban, materially rich or poor, peaceful or insecure — the centrality of knowledge to the flourishing of youth and adolescents remains unchanged. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being. The responsibility to generate new knowledge and apply it in socially beneficial ways rests on the shoulders of every young person. In the same way, the creation of an environment conducive to this process is a duty of every government. Without access to knowledge, the meaningful participation of youth in the affairs of their communities is not possible. The primary focus of educational processes, then, must be to build the capacity within young people to participate fully as protagonists of social progress.

Meaningful participation also takes the form of safe and productive employment. Education that does not instil in youth an awareness of their inherent potentialities, their role as active citizens and the needs of their community further weakens young people's prospects for employment. This in turn fuels the exodus of educated youth from rural to urban areas and from non-industrialized to industrialized nations. Young people, although often perceived as simply the beneficiaries of education, must be involved in the development of educational systems, thereby helping to align the content and methodology of educational processes with the needs and aspirations of their communities. This urgent need is further underscored by the rapid growth rates of the youth and adolescent population in some parts of the world.

In order for youth to play their important role, the inequities of girls' access to quality education must be addressed. As has been repeatedly affirmed, the education of girls has a multiplier effect, resulting in reduced chances of early marriage; the greater likelihood of girls taking an informed and active role in family planning; reduced infant and maternal mortality; enhanced participation of girls in social, economic and political decision-making; and the promotion of economic prosperity. This is particularly urgent in parts of the world where adolescent girls are married and begin to bear children. The need to extend educational opportunities to girls rests on the understanding that the equality of men and women and boys and girls is a fundamental truth about human reality and not just a desirable condition to be achieved for the good of society. Their full participation in the arenas of law, politics, science and technology, commerce and religion, to name but a few, are needed to forge a social order enlightened by the contributions and wisdom of fully half of the world's population. As women are one of the most powerful influences on the health and well-being of their children, deficiencies in the mother's

education, will, in most cases, multiply throughout succeeding generations. Governments, then, must follow through on their commitments to prohibit such unjust practices as infanticide, prenatal sex selection, female genital mutilation, the trafficking of girl children and the use of girls in prostitution and pornography, and to enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of both spouses. The overarching objective must be to address the root causes of gender bias so that all people can play their rightful role in the transformation of society.

The investments that governments make in the education and health of their youth and adolescents represent no less than an investment in the stability, security and prosperity of the nation itself. Educational approaches and methods, guided by the needs and aspirations of respective communities, supported by families and social institutions and inspired by the awareness of the inestimable latent potential in every child, will awaken youth and adolescents not only to their own intellectual capabilities but also to their role as protagonists of change in their communities and in the world.